



# Sports Nutrition

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## THE COMPULSIVE ATHLETE: Thoughts about Food

Many people who exercise compulsively have inflexible eating patterns and are obsessed about their weight. They often are perfectionists and have a great desire for control. These traits are also characteristic of people who grew up with alcoholism, divorce or other family dysfunctions. Compulsive athletes generally have carried with them into adulthood personality traits that now affect their attitudes towards their weight, food and exercise program. The following are some traits characteristically observed in people who grew up with some type of family dysfunction. If you are a compulsive exerciser, this information may give a perspective on your relationship with food.

**DRIVE FOR PERFECTION:** As a child, you may have tried to be perfect, with hopes it would elicit praise and recognition from your (alcoholic) parent. You also may have hoped that by being perfect, you'd somehow be able to secure the family of its problem. As an adult, you may still strive for perfection. You expect yourself to have a perfect physique, eat the perfect diet and maintain a perfect training schedule. You constantly push yourself to live up to these demanding expectations; you punish yourself if you fall short. You may lack a healthy perspective on food, weight and exercise.

**DESIRE FOR CONTROL:** Compulsive athletes generally have an inordinate need for control. If, as a child, you were unable to control your (alcoholic) parent, you may now over-react and seek areas of your life that you can control -- your diet, weight and exercise program. You may set up rigid rules and regulations, such as:

- Ritually running eight miles every day despite weather, aches, illness, fatigue or holidays.
- Restricting fatty foods -- i.e., no birthday cake, ice cream, salad dressing or peanut butter for you. Other people can eat these foods, but you must avoid them to remain perfectly thin.
- Monitoring your weight daily. If the scale reads higher than your perfect weight, you punish yourself by exercising harder and eating less.

You mercilessly judge yourself according to these rules. You are either "good" or "bad"; you lack flexibility and spontaneity. For example, if your friends unexpectedly suggest getting together for dinner, you may decline in favor of running the obligatory eight miles and eating your home-prepared "safe" foods.

**BEHAVE COMPULSIVELY:** Compulsive athletes often have other compulsive behaviors; they are not only exercise-aholics but also may be work-aholics and/or food-aholics.

- As a work-aholic, your demanding schedule may interfere with healthful meal patterns. For example, you may have "no time" to eat lunch, so instead survive on coffee. This calorie-free (i.e. "perfect") meal simultaneously helps you maintain your perfect weight.
- Work-aholics are often food-aholics. As a reaction to the work stresses, you may reach towards food. Rest and relaxation could perhaps offer better nourishment and energy, but you feel guilty if you "do nothing" or relax. Hence, mindless eating becomes your excuse for a rest break from the constant push to work hard.
- To compensate for compulsive eating, food-aholics often become exercise-aholics, using exhaustive exercise to burn off the binge-calories and retain a perfect weight.

This vicious cycle of work, food and exercise-abuse often lacks a healthy balance.

**ASSUME TOO MUCH RESPONSIBILITY:** Having a compulsive personality, you may tend to take care of everyone but yourself, perhaps as you did as a child when you assumed inordinate amounts of parental responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning and shopping, as well as getting your siblings ready for school. You also may have assumed the responsibility of trying to "cure" the family's pain. As an adult, you may take on too many responsibilities both at work and home. You generally have trouble saying No, believing "If I don't do it, no one else will". You need to learn how to "let go" and trust that others will take over.

**FEEL INADEQUATE:** Despite your many accomplishments (being a perfect worker, having a perfectly slim physique, maintaining a high fitness level), you still feel inadequate and believe that you could have done better. After all, you were never able to quite please your (alcoholic) parent, so how could you ever please anyone else??? Plus, you may have failed at resolving the parent's (drinking) problem.

Hence, you relentlessly push yourself to be better. You train harder, diet harder, work harder. This constant feeling of inadequacy may drive you to exhaustion, at which point you may abuse food as a reward and exercise as a stress reliever.

**HAVE DIFFICULTY HAVING FUN:** You tend to feel guilty if you let go and relax. If as a child, your (alcoholic) parent put a damper on the mood in the house, you may have rarely enjoyed childhood fun, nor heard your parents laughing. Now, as an adult, you may still have difficulty "playing". You may feel awkward in a group - different from others and isolated. Hence, you are more comfortable and feel in better control when you work or exercise. When and if the over-working leads to overeating, you simply exercise more. You have more fun running or biking by yourself.

**HAVE TROUBLE WITH INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS:** As a child, you may have felt unloved and abandoned. As an adult, you now may feel unworthy of being loved and afraid of being abandoned. Rather than let a partner get too close, you opt for predictable and "safe" activities that you can do alone - including working, exercising and eating.

**DENIAL OF FEELINGS:** As a child growing up in an distressed home, you quickly learned to deny feelings of sadness or anger and instead pretend to the outside world that everything was fine. Now, as an adult, you may continue to deny that you are hungry, tired, lonely, depressed or sad. You may bury yourself in work, exercise or food.

For example, rather than stay home and confront your loneliness, you may exhaust yourself with an inordinate amount of exercise and then treat yourself to an ice cream sundae. Somehow, chocolate wonderfully smotheres the emptiness of the present, the pain of the past and the fear of the future but only temporarily.

If these characteristics sound familiar and if you feel as though your life isn't working for you, you might want to seek guidance from both a sports nutritionist and a counselor skilled with resolving addictive behaviors. These specialists can help you focus your energy and allow you to establish a better balance between food, weight and exercise.

Many compulsive athletes have also been helped through Alcoholics Anonymous groups for Adult Children of Alcoholics. Whatever the route, your goal can be to learn how to train healthfully and not pound yourself; be gentler with yourself, not constantly punish yourself; be your own friend.

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#### SUGGESTED READING

McFarland, Barbara	<i>Feeding the Empty Heart: ACQA and Compulsive Eating</i>	\$19.95
Prussin, Rebecca	<i>Hooked on Exercise: How to Manage Exercise Addiction</i>	10.00
Roth, Geneen	<i>Breaking Free from Compulsive Eating</i>	5.00

Available by ordering from: Gurze Books, P.O. Box 2238, Carlsbad, CA 92018 (800-756-7533).  
Their *Eating Disorders Bookshelf Catalogue* includes books on eating disorders, addictions and body image.